



## PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

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# Culturally responsive instruction

*What is it, and how can we incorporate it in the classroom?*

**M**y theme for these columns is big ideas that changed my thinking as an educator. Many teachers I meet are intrigued by the concept of culturally responsive instruction, and that is the fourth big idea I want to share with you. These teachers work in classrooms with students of diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, and they sense that culturally responsive instruction offers a means of creating a learning environment where all students can become excellent readers and writers. However, because these teachers often are not of the same cultural backgrounds as their students, they are hesitant to begin work with this concept.

What is culturally responsive instruction? This form of teaching is based on the idea that students of diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds can be successful in school if lessons and activities build on the strengths they bring from home. The purpose of culturally responsive instruction, however, is not simply to allow children to feel comfortable in the classroom. The purpose is to improve students' opportunities for academic success by letting their exist-

ing strengths and interests serve as a bridge to the new learning offered by the school.

For example, some Native Hawaiian children are raised in families that follow the practice of sibling caretaking. Older brothers and sisters are responsible for the younger ones, seeing that they get dressed in the morning, report to school on time, complete their homework, and so on. Children who are familiar with sibling caretaking are skilled at working together with other youngsters.

Teachers can build on this strength by creating situations in which students learn by working in small groups with their peers. In the home, children might be cooperating to contribute to the smooth running of the household. In the classroom, however, teachers can organize small groups that serve as book clubs or literature discussion circles. Because teachers are pursuing academic goals, they draw upon but do not attempt to duplicate home settings.

Of course, it is always highly valuable for teachers to have knowledge of students' home cultures and languages. I have found over time, however, that culturally responsive instruction does not require specific adjustments to match the backgrounds of students from each different cultural group. This should prove heartening to teachers who work with students from many different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. In these settings, it is clear that culturally responsive instruction cannot be focused on teaching lessons that provide an exact match to each child's background.

### Balancing competition and cooperation

Rather than viewing culturally responsive instruction in terms of matching, the approach I recommend is based on considering contrasting world views—a Western or mainstream perspective versus a diverse or non-mainstream perspective. Examples of contrasting world views include valuing independence versus interdependence, or measuring success in material versus spiritual terms. The idea is to strike a balance between the values typically reinforced in Western schools and the values often promoted in the homes of students of diverse backgrounds.

I have discovered that one pair of contrasting world views—competition versus cooperation—plays a particularly

significant role in classrooms. In my experience, teachers who design learning activities to create a balance between these two values are taking a significant step forward in making culturally responsive instruction a reality in their classrooms.

Competition is such a strong value in many school settings that we may not even be sensitive to its presence. Competition

is the value underlying classroom recitation. Study after study verifies that many teachers rely on recitation to structure their interactions with students. In this pattern of interaction, the teacher asks a question and students raise their hands to signal they would like to answer. The teacher chooses one student to respond. After the student responds, the teacher evaluates his or her answer, and the cycle begins again.

Recitation is designed to have students compete against one another to get the teacher's attention and to show that they know the answer. There is certainly a place for good, healthy competition. The danger I see is that an overreliance on competition may put students of diverse backgrounds, who often have been raised to value cooperation, at a disadvantage in the classroom.

From the teacher's point of view, students who don't raise their hands to answer may seem indifferent or uncooperative. From the students' point of view, however, reluctance to volunteer an answer may be a sign of not wanting to be seen by peers as behaving in a superior, know-it-all manner. These students may be more motivated to work for the good of the whole group, rather than to stand out as stars. Also, some students for whom English is a second language may be shy about speaking in front of their peers in formal settings.

### Practical lesson ideas

It's certainly not necessary to eliminate classroom recitation entirely, but it can be beneficial to offer all students, especially those of diverse backgrounds, a variety of ways to interact during lessons. Here are some suggestions for you to consider.

**Practical idea #1:** Analyze your lesson plans to identify patterns of inter-

action. Are you incorporating a variety of patterns, those reflecting the value of cooperation as well as the value of competition? If you find that most of your lessons rely on classroom recitation and the value of competition, try to redesign some lessons to incor-

porate other patterns of interaction. For example, divide the class into small discussion groups or have students work in pairs.

The results might surprise you. A high school teacher in Hawai'i had been conducting all her lessons following the pattern of whole-class recitation. She was having difficulty keeping her students' attention, and as a result, spent considerable time on classroom management. This teacher began experimenting with having her students work in small groups to discuss key points in the novels the class was reading. Her classes began to go so well, with such high levels of student engagement, that she confessed, "I feel like I'm cheating."

**Practical idea #2:** Discuss with students the pattern of classroom interaction to be followed in a lesson. When students come from a variety of cultural backgrounds, some patterns are likely to be unfamiliar to them. For example, let students know if this is a time when you would like them to work together, or if this is a time when you would like them to think their own thoughts. Let them

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## Other big ideas

In her columns this year, IRA President Kathryn H. Au has focused on big ideas that changed her thinking as an educator. Thus far, she has addressed the following big ideas: promoting ownership of literacy, creating a staircase curriculum, providing powerful comprehension instruction, and now providing culturally responsive instruction.

In case you missed any of her previous columns, or if you would like to reread any of them, you can access them on the Sample Articles page in the *Reading Today* section of the Publications area of the IRA website at [www.reading.org](http://www.reading.org).

*Culturally responsive instruction improves students' opportunities for academic success.*

## Holiday closing set for IRA

In observance of the holiday season, the International Reading Association's headquarters office will be closed beginning Thursday, December 24. It will reopen on Monday, January 4. We wish all Association members a safe and happy holiday season.

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know if they should raise their hands and wait for you to call on them, or if they can call out answers without waiting. Be sure to give students the reasons you are using this pattern of interaction. *Example:* "This is a brainstorming activity, and we're working in small groups because that's a good way to generate a lot of ideas."

Even when teachers make expectations clear, students may still require several tries to succeed with a new form of interaction. For this reason, it is helpful to introduce major patterns of interaction early in the school year and then continue to employ these patterns consistently as the year progresses.

I observed a second-grade teacher who introduced her students to the writers' workshop on the first day of school. She taught her students that each writers' workshop would flow from a minilesson to writing time and small-group instruction, and finally to the author's chair, when students would gather on the carpet to hear a classmate read a piece aloud.

Because the teacher followed this routine, her students learned to shift among patterns of interaction ranging from whole-class recitation to informal conversation with peers. After a month, the teacher had established a productive, smoothly running writers' workshop.

**Practical idea #3:** Break away from the typical pattern of classroom recitation by experimenting with different ways of having students participate in lessons. Here are two approaches you can try.

*Pair-share.* Let students discuss with a partner the answer to your question, then have one person from each pair share with the whole class. This gives all students a chance to be engaged.

Some students of diverse backgrounds may lack the confidence to share an idea spontaneously with the whole class, and speaking with a partner first gives them a chance to rehearse. When you pose the next question, let the students know you would like to hear from those who did not share last time.

*Quick-share.* Go around the group quickly and have each student give a brief response to your question. Explain to students that you would like to hear from everyone, but that they have the right to pass if they don't feel prepared to answer.

With both pair-share and quick-share, you have created a space for everyone to participate. Talkative students will have a chance, but so will quiet students who might otherwise be ignored. You have made it clear that you value the contributions of each and every student.

I think you can see that culturally responsive instruction is largely an attitude rather than a fixed set of practices. If you're a teacher working with students of diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, I would like to know what's worked for you! Please send comments to [readingtoday@reading.org](mailto:readingtoday@reading.org).

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